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# The INQUIRER

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# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

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**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the General Assembly of the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches 2001*

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## Inquiring Words

I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it.

Preface to 'A Christmas Carol'  
by Charles Dickens

## Letter from the *Inquirer* chair

I have to inform readers of a small increase in our charges. From January 2012, the price of the paper will rise from 85 pence to 90 pence per copy plus postage, resulting in an annual subscription of £32. For bulk orders the charge will be £28 per copy for orders less than six copies and £24 for all orders of six copies or more. For overseas orders we charge the individual copy rate plus postage.

We regret these necessary increases, of course, but we feel that the paper still compares very favourably with similar religious journals.

We are only able to keep these prices so low because of generous grants we receive from Hibbert Trust, Memorial Hall Trust, Dr Daniel Jones Fund and many of our District Associations. We are most grateful for these grants and hope that they will continue. If other District Associations that at present do not send us a grant will consider doing so, that would be a great help. The General Assembly also supports the paper and has its own pages of news and information.

It is always disappointing, of course, when congregations reduce the numbers of copies they take, and a cause of rejoicing when they increase them! The feedback comments we receive about the paper's contents are almost always very positive. We are confident that we provide an essential service to the movement, at home and abroad, and have plans for an additional on-line version next year.

So we ask everyone to do all that they can to promote *The Inquirer* and help us increase its circulation. We have a dream that one day we shall be able to publish every issue in colour, but at present the cost makes this possible only a few times a year. Another way that individuals, congregations, District Associations and other groups can help us is to sponsor a colour issue. Contact our editor for more details.

Thank you for your support. Continue to enjoy our denominational paper!

— John Midgley, chair of the Board of Directors of 'The Inquirer'

## With thanks

The following congregations and organisations have made grants to help *The Inquirer* continue to publish. They have the gratitude of the Board.

General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches  
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This colour double-issue of *The Inquirer* was sponsored by the Bury Unitarian Church, Lancashire. The Inquirer will skip one issue and the next will be dated 10 January 2012.



## Christmas Grace



We meet together at this darkest time to celebrate the season of Christmas.

We know it as a time traditionally graced with light and hope.

And we ask that in the midst of much that offends us –

the unrelenting clamour to spend more and more:

images, softened by sentimentality,

that breed greed and discontent, seducing us –

a child's disappointment subliminally writ large,

a holy act of hospitality trivialised.

And we ask that the true spirit of Christmas will cleanse our perception,  
that our hearts re-discover pure moments graced with light and hope.

Holy moments – the rituals of love,

when we meet each other,

Moments when we eat and drink together,

Moments when we give and receive in the warmth of fellowship with family and friends.

Moments when we meet strangers and feel their human warmth.

Let these moments shine and glow.

Allow our hearts to alight on these simple things that hallow the spirit of Christmas.

Let us put aside what burdens our souls

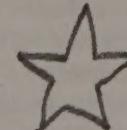
and be open to Christmas Grace as these moments sparkle within us.

Let us remember the Christ child – Jesus, the baby born into the world, a symbol of hope for the world,

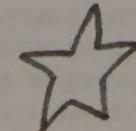
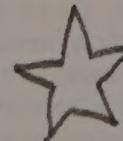
and let us think of all children and the hope and love that attends each birth.

Eternal Spirit of Love and Light, everlasting – open our hearts so our very being is transfigured by Christmas Grace at this time of seasonal darkness.

And let us know peace.



– Margaret Kirk



# 'A Christmas Carol' goes beyond

By Feargus O'Connor

It is, the great Victorian novelist Thackeray wrote, 'a national benefit, and to every man and woman who reads it a personal kindness... Many men were known to sit down after perusing it, and write off letters to their friends, not about business, but out of their fullness of heart, and to wish old acquaintances a happy Christmas...'

John Forster, a staunch Unitarian and close friend of Charles Dickens and his authorised biographer, said of this book that it taught that Christmas 'must be kindness, benevolence, charity, mercy, and forbearance, or its plum puddings would turn to bile, and its roast beef be indigestible'.

Over 40 years later Israel Zangwill, the Jewish novelist, suggested in December 1915 that the British should drop copies of this book on undefended German towns in answer to the Zeppelin raids, in an attempt to instil something of Dickens's Christmas spirit into them.

That book was of course *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens's best loved work and which embodies the true humanitarian spirit. It has arguably done more good than any other work of imaginative fiction in human history.

In the spring of 1843 Charles Dickens, passionately concerned about issues of social injustice, was, in his own words, 'perfectly stricken down' by the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission. He vowed, in a letter to the Unitarian social and public health reformer Dr Thomas Southwood Smith, to strike a 'sledge hammer blow on behalf of the Poor Man's Child'. In the autumn, having visited a ragged school, he reported to his friend the philanthropist Angela Burdett Coutts: 'My heart sinks within me when I go into these scenes.'

Dickens was planning to write a pamphlet against the terrible social abuses and injustices he witnessed, but we can all be grateful that instead he decided to write in the autumn and winter of 1843 his matchless moral fable *A Christmas Carol*, a story which has opened so many millions of hearts since and done incalculable good.

The central, moving and powerful lesson of *A Christmas Carol* is of course illustrated in the parable of Ebenezer Scrooge: a man forced to face the truth about himself and change for the better. In the space of one night he is transformed from a 'tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner', whose coldness froze his features and made him

as solitary as an oyster, into someone who has become 'as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew...'

Such a transformation may not be accomplished as quickly or easily for real-life Scrooges as it is for Ebenezer in the tale but the story does show us that new beginnings can be made if, as individuals, we are determined to look for them.

Let us reflect on the process of transformation in Scrooge. We first see him as already described. His only business is business. When he is asked for a contribution towards a few Christmas provisions for the poor and destitute he can only reply that he has already paid his share of taxes to keep up the workhouse and other cold-hearted institutions. The poor must go there or die.

Since the death of his business partner Marley, he has had no friend and has sought none. He has created his own spiritual prison because he has forgotten his own humanity

and is on the road to perpetual loneliness: giving no pleasure to himself or his nephew and no respite or milk of human kindness to his poor clerk Bob Cratchit and his family, not even at Christmas.

When he praises his old partner, Jacob Marley, as a 'good man of business', Marley replies:

'Business! Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business. Charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business.'

Scrooge is taken back to his own past and memories of himself as a vulnerable and neglected schoolboy. He weeps 'to see his poor forgotten self as he used to be' and wishes now he had given something to the boy singing a Christmas carol whom he had so coldly dismissed the previous evening.

In another episode, in stark contrast to his own treatment of his poor clerk Bob Cratchit, Scrooge is reminded of the goodness of 'old Fezziwig', to whom he was apprenticed as a young man. He is shown the vision of Fezziwig's Christmas Eve party for his apprentices and is touched by this kindness, Scrooge explains that Fezziwig 'has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil... The happiness he gives is quite as great as if it cost a fortune.' Pricked by this memory of long ago, Scrooge wishes he were 'able to say a word or two to my clerk just now'. But is it too late?



*Marley's ghost tells Scrooge, 'Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business. Charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business.'* Etching by John Leech

# personal change

Scrooge's human feelings are touched and he wishes that he had done things differently earlier in the day when, though he had begrudgingly given Bob the whole of Christmas Day off, he had dismissed him with a growl.

A further powerful turning point for Scrooge comes with his vision of the Cratchits. They have eaten their Christmas meal and we see a picture of their genuine happiness at just being with each other. Bob keeps Tiny Tim, his disabled son, by his side and, afraid he might be taken from him, lovingly holds his withered hand. With an interest he has not shown before, Scrooge asks the spirit if Tiny Tim will live.

The spirit replies: 'I see a vacant seat in the chimney corner and a crutch without an owner.' Deeply moved, Scrooge pleads for Tiny Tim to be spared.

Finally, we see Scrooge transformed, making his new beginning, grateful for the second chance he has been given and eager to give pleasure. Dickens tells us that Scrooge 'was so fluttered and so glowing with his good intentions that his broken voice would scarcely answer to his call. He had been sobbing violently in his conflict with the Spirit, and his face was wet with tears.'

We see him buying the prize turkey for Bob Cratchit's family on Christmas Day. He later raises Bob's salary and becomes 'a second father' to Tiny Tim, who does not die. After so many years Scrooge finds again that good part of himself which dwells within all of us.

The story of *A Christmas Carol* teaches a timeless lesson about how it is possible for even an individual as wicked as the unregenerated Scrooge to change. The story teaches us a second lesson: the need for society itself to be fundamentally transformed. It is not only individuals who need a new beginning. Dickens gives a prophetic and stark warning of the consequences for us all if this lesson is not heeded. When we look about our contemporary world and see so many global inequalities and injustices, can we honestly say that we have learned that lesson?

We see the results in terrible exploitation and grinding poverty when society does not care for the boys and girls shown to Scrooge. Dickens's Ignorance and Want are human representations but we see the actual living and breathing human beings, flesh of our flesh, and these young people are the citizens of the future. Yes, *A Christmas Carol* speaks to us about human nature and still teaches us powerful and timeless lessons.

Scrooge wakes up from his night of spirit visions determined on a new beginning because, reminded by what he has seen of his own human frailty and mortality, he allows himself to feel compassion for other human beings. He remembers that he too was once an abandoned and neglected child left behind at school in the holidays. He recalls that, like Bob Cratchit, he too was once a vulnerable employee. In remembering these things, Scrooge of course reaches out in empathy to others. He is learning an important lesson: that, in essence, we are none of us very different from each other. Faced with a choice, he rejects his old ways and in future he vows to use all the opportunities he has for positive ends. He realises that contributing to our common human welfare and deeds of altruism are so much more important than the mere accumulation of material riches.

Is not the image of the reformed Scrooge's paternal rela-

(Continued on next page)

## What the Dickens...?

By Margaret Kirk

Charles Dickens and Christmas go together. We will be hearing a whole lot more about Charles Dickens next year in 2012, as it marks 200 years since his birth. He is, rightly, one of our most cherished English writers so there will be lavish praise for his literary achievements.

### Blame Dickens

Sometimes though, you come across a disenchanted and slightly critical tone. Some years ago I was reading the views of a journalist who held Charles Dickens responsible for all the excessiveness of the Christmas season. According to this article, before Charles Dickens, Christmas was a much simpler affair – a one day event after which family life got back to normal pretty swiftly. She was a woman journalist complaining about Dickens, saying that, those of us, mainly women, who find Christmas a burden, know where to point the finger of blame.



Charles Dickens by Matthew Brady, US National Archives

And there seemed to be some truth in what she said because when I did a bit of research, I discovered that around 200 years ago Christmas didn't get much mention at all. Magazines and newspapers at that time didn't even mention the event. Between 1790 and 1835, *The Times* newspaper did not report any Christmas activities and New Year and Valentine Day's festivals were thought to be more important.

She forecast that Christmas couldn't continue to go on in its current fashion for much longer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and suggested there was already a rebellion of sorts amongst sensible people who were looking for escape routes, who were finding it all too much: 'too much cooking, too much eating, too much buying and wrapping and choosing and sending of presents and cards, too much of becoming progressively more exhausted, too much emotional wear and tear with families all trying too hard to be too nice to one another...'

Perhaps I don't come across that many sensible people as, sadly, I see little evidence of a rebellion and when I read her hugely enjoyable piece, I remember thinking, very sensibly, well, let's just do our celebrating and our giving in moderation, rather than turn our back on the whole Christmas venture. But I was interested in what she had to say about Charles Dickens and it set me thinking about how great his influence had been.

### A man with a mission

I don't suppose we'll hear much in the forthcoming year about Dickens' Unitarian connections but I hope we'll be reminded that he was a man with a mission. He looked at the world as it was and he imagined it as it should be. He wanted to recreate what he thought was lost and make the place at Christmas time a brighter place for everyone. His tales were serialised in newspapers so that hundreds of people could read them like many of us follow the stories of soaps on TV

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# What the Dickens? Credit and blame

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today. Dickens became so popular that he ended up touring all over the world giving readings from his stories.

The most famous Christmas story of all is his story called *A Christmas Carol* which he finally finished in 1843 – the story about the transformation of a mean spirited man, Ebenezer Scrooge. It was a great success in England but what did they make of it in America?

Dickens arrived in Boston on Christmas Eve in 1867 unsure of the reaction he would receive but he needn't have worried. His audience was entranced and moved by the scenes he described. They all saw in their own minds the poverty of Tiny Tim and his family and the ferocious selfishness of Mr Scrooge.

There was a man in the audience listening to the story who was deeply affected by what he heard. Mr Fairbanks, a wealthy and successful factory owner was so moved by Dickens' words, that the following day, Christmas Day, he closed down his factory giving his workers a holiday and he never opened his factory at Christmas again. So Dickens influence in America was pretty considerable!

## The ghost of Christmas Past

A few years ago I read *A Christmas Carol* properly again since childhood. It doesn't take very long and I was moved by the story too but what moved me most of all was what the ghost of Christmas Past revealed to Scrooge. The ghost takes him back to the little market town where he was brought up as a boy. He passes girls and boys in country carts driven by farmers, all in great spirits, calling out 'Merry Christmas' to each other. He takes him back to the school that all the children have left eagerly on their way home for Christmas, takes him right inside the school itself:

'The school is not quite deserted,' said the ghost. 'A solitary child, neglected by his friends, is left there still.'

Scrooge replies 'he knew it'. And he sobbed. And then the ghost takes him to a dull red brick mansion and they go through a door at the back of the house which takes them into a long, bare, melancholy room, where there are forms and desks. And Dickens describes how, at one of these 'a lonely boy was reading near a feeble fire; and Scrooge sat down upon a form

and wept to see his poor forgotten self as he had used to be ... not a latent echo in the house, not a squeak and scuffle from the mice behind the panelling ... not a sigh among the leafless boughs of one despondent poplar ... but fell upon the heart of Scrooge with a softening influence and gave a freer passage to his tears.'

And then again, yet another Christmas, the ghost takes him back and this time the room is darker and more dirty. This is how Dickens describes it:

'The panels shrunk, the windows cracked; fragments of plaster fell out of the ceiling, and the naked laths were shown instead, but how all this was brought about Scrooge knew no more than you do. He only knew that it was quite correct; that everything had happened so; that there he was alone again when all the other boys had gone home for their jolly holidays. He was not reading now, but walking up and down despairingly.'

## Transformation

The story of the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge from miser to generous giver is one that is designed to prick our conscience, make us reflect on our own behaviour, make us ashamed of those times when we too have been mean spirited. But far more powerful for me, as I read this story is the picture of the lonely boy and the tears that the adult Scrooge sheds for that lonely despairing boy.

Far more powerful for me are the humble origins of the adult Scrooge's tight-fisted holding and grasping born out of a sea of loneliness, in the heart of a child who is frightened and helpless, desperate to make connections and find consolation.

Far, far more powerful for me is Dickens' awareness that when the ghost of Christmas Past taps the most painful memories of all, Scrooge's tears begin to flow for that frightened child and then, and only until then, suffering is made conscious and real healing can begin.

Dickens may bear some responsibility for Christmas excessiveness but for that I can forgive him. His awareness of suffering and its transformative power is a true gift which deepens and enriches the spirit of Christmas.

Margaret Kirk is a retired Unitarian minister.

## 'Carol' was nearly a social reform pamphlet

(Continued from previous page)

tionship with Tiny Tim and the Cratchit family a symbol of society's regeneration? Is Dickens not showing us that the way to help eradicate child poverty all over 19th Century England was for more unreconstructed Scrooges to change themselves into new reformed Scrooges? Are we not being urged by the story to heed the vital lesson that in order to have a healthy society we must care about and value the individuals who constitute it?

Who could disagree with these words of Dickens's contemporary and literary rival William Makepeace Thackeray?

'Was there ever a better charity sermon preached in the world than Dickens's *Christmas Carol*? I believe it occasioned immense hospitality... was the means of lighting up hundreds of kind fires at Christmas time; caused a wonderful outpouring

of Christmas punch-brewing...'

'There are creations of Mr Dickens which seem to me to rank as personal benefits, figures so delightful that one feels better for knowing them. The atmosphere in which these people live is wholesome to breathe in; you feel that to be allowed to speak to them is a personal kindness...'

*A Christmas Carol* is a parable which speaks to each and every one of us. Let us reflect on, and take to our hearts, the precepts it teaches and be true to the spirit of humanity and fellow feeling, altruism and plain human goodness and kindness which shines from every page of this moral tale that speaks to every generation and across all barriers of language, race and religion.

The Rev Feargus O'Connor is minister at Golders Green.

# 'Messiah' by the coypu: Pagan and Christian

By Frank Walker

'An impulse to spend seizes everyone; gifts and presents are exchanged and everywhere there is feasting and carousing.' These words were written over 2000 years ago, so they can't be describing Christmas. They refer to the festival of the Calends that was celebrated everywhere in the Roman Empire. It was the great mid-winter festival, and eventually the new Christian Church took it over, in part, and began to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25th, though nobody knows his real birthday.

So the pagan jollifications that some people deplore go back a very long way. Even before the birth of Jesus, people were rushing to the shops in time for December 25th. There's much that's very silly in this, but it isn't all bad. At a time of recession it gives a much-needed boost to the economy. Mince pies and glasses of port beside a roaring fire – what's wrong with them? High spirits and feasting at the turn of the year – we shouldn't be human if we didn't enjoy all this jollity. One important meaning of Christmas is the celebration of the earthy human enjoyments of this world. It's a meeting place, and indeed a marriage – a marriage of the pagan and the Christian.

It's a special time of memory and hope. I have two vivid memories that express very neatly the fact that Christmas is a marriage. One is a memory of Christmas shopping in the first big city I ever knew: Manchester. For a child, department stores bustling with people seemed a great adventure. I still enjoy them, but perhaps I enjoyed them more in the days when I wasn't presented with the bill. The department store of my memory is Lewis's in Piccadilly. As a child I was fascinated and frightened by the lifts with their sickening plunge and bracing heave. The moving staircases were safer, great fun, and you had to be careful to step off properly in the midst of those pushing crowds. Still, it was fun and it was friendly, because those crowds were trying to become modern Wise Men intent on buying some gifts to offer. Unselfishly they were trying to give pleasure to someone. However ineptly, they were trying to tread the way of loving generosity – bless them!

Another memory is of going to listen to *The Messiah* given by the Halle Orchestra conducted by Sir John Barbirolli. In those days this took place in a strange and bizarre setting. Manchester's big concert hall, the Free Trade Hall, had been bombed. It was not rebuilt until well after the end of the war. In the meantime the Halle played in the King's Hall, Belle Vue. What an odd place Belle Vue was: a zoo, an amusement park, and a series of gardens. So on your way to hear *The Messiah* you passed the Lion House, the coypu's cage and the camels as well as the giant Bob Sleigh track and the dodgems – the marvels of the animal creation and vulgar, boisterous fun.

Then there were the carefully tended gardens we were walking through on those raw December afternoons. It didn't occur to me at the time, but we were being given an object lesson in another profound meaning of Christmas. Below the earth's



Mistletoe is one of the symbols that marks the 'marriage' of Christian and Pagan traditions at Christmas. Photo by Stephanie Berghaeuser

bleak surface lay the seed waiting to appear in power in due time to bring new life into the world. Even in dreary winter's cold, nature is never spent. This is taken up too by the Christian message, for the child of Mary is himself new life.

When we arrived at King's Hall it turned out to be an enormous circus arena. There was the Halle Orchestra and Chorus and glorious John Barbirolli himself. There, where clowns had clowned and ponies pranced, we heard Handel's sublime music, 'The glory, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed!' Could there be a more bizarre illustration of the marriage between the pagan and the Christian that is Christmas? To our rumbustious earthy enjoyment is added the story of what challenges, transforms and illuminates and overcomes the world.

Jesus comes as a great light-bringer. He is a light shining in the darkness. He represents for us the reality of the human form divine through which the light shines. And the light does not exist for itself, but for the sake of others. It does not so much point to itself as point the Way. It lights for us a way through the darkling plain of this world.

The life of Jesus is a divine gift to humankind. His pattern of life, the Way of loving generosity, is the pattern life must take if it is to rise above destruction and despair. We have our own doctrine of incarnation that is wider and more generous than the traditional understanding. It is very much in harmony with ancient Jewish teaching, for the Jews also had their own conception in which the whole of humanity was to be seen as God's incarnation. As James Martineau put it, 'The incarnation is true, not of Christ exclusively, but of man universally and of God everlasting: he bends into the human to dwell there and humanity is the susceptible organ of the divine.'

The human form divine is always present. It is at work in any example of real human goodness. Its most beautiful symbol is the Holy Child, for ever reborn, and always vulnerable, forever menaced by all that is evil and cruel. This dark reality is represented in the Christmas story by something we usually do not wish to dwell on – the jealousy of King Herod and his slaughter of innocent children, forcing Mary and Joseph to flee with their child into exile. The human form divine is menaced by the most horrific human evil. It must suffer. It will be crucified and left for dead. But it cannot be destroyed. It will be for ever renewed, and forever reborn. So the message of Christmas is not simply jollity and sentimentality. It is a message of hope and renewal, a reminder that we always need. There is blackness in plenty outside. The world and human life are full of unimaginable horror and destructiveness. Christmas reminds us that even so the human form divine is a reality. Through it there shines a great light that cannot be put out. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not. The darkness cannot overcome it. The light shines.

Frank Walker is minister emeritus of the Cambridge Unitarian Church.

# Perhaps we can be our best selves

By Andy Pakula

With Hanukkah nearly upon us, my thoughts turn to the Hanukkah celebrations of my past. The nightly lighting of the menorah was always followed by gifts. As a child, my sister and I would receive one gift on each of the eight nights of Hanukkah. Actually, to tell the whole story, we received gifts for both Hanukkah and Christmas. I suppose that was the perfect beginning for a future Unitarian...

In an important sense, Hanukkah is a celebration of the victory of freedom over oppression. We sing about the Maccabees – the Jewish guerrilla army that defeated the army of the occupying Syrian Seleucid Empire.

Beyond the overthrow of tyranny, the popular focus of Hanukkah is the story of the miracle of the light – that a small amount of consecrated oil burned for eight days when it should only have been enough for one. This is the story that lies behind the lighting of the menorah – the eight-armed candelabra that is the best-known symbol of this holiday.

But really, the miracle of lamp oil lasting longer than expected is really a rather odd miracle to continue celebrating more than two millennia later! In fact, it appears that the miracle part of Hanukkah was more of a late addition as the story of Hanukkah combined with the ancient longing to bring light to the darkness of winter and with other stories and celebrations. Of course, there are much deeper meanings to the holiday that account for this story's longevity.

Stripping away the miracle story and drama of armed struggle, the essence of Hanukkah that remains is the restoration and rededication of the Jerusalem temple. In fact, this is the origin of the word Hanukkah – it comes from the word 'chanak', meaning dedication or consecration. The miracle of the lights is fun and it fits well into this season where we long for light, but the restoration of the temple to holiness is the kernel of the story.

In 175 BCE, Antiochus Epiphanes ascended to the throne of the Seleucid empire. Under his reign, the relative tolerance of his predecessors turned to ruthless oppression. Now, instead of permitting the Jews to practice their religion freely, the holy temple in Jerusalem was looted and defiled. A statue of Zeus was erected in the temple and pigs – unclean animals under Jewish law – were slaughtered on the sacred altar. Jews were massacred and the practice of Judaism was effectively outlawed. But, as so often happens, the oppression designed to suppress the Jews had the opposite effect – it provoked the successful revolt led by the Maccabees.

After years of struggle, the Maccabees drove off the occupying forces and at last liberated the Jerusalem temple. Now came the work of rededicating and cleansing it. The temple had been defiled. The temple had to be cleansed. A new altar had to be put in place of the polluted one. New holy vessels had to be made.

Hanukkah marks this restoration and rededication of the temple.

In my mind, the image of the defiled temple is filth. There is debris and rubbish everywhere. Broken pottery, smashed bottles, rotting food. The remains of slaughtered pigs stain the stone floor and raise a terrible stench.

The temple was essential to the Jews' connection to God, so to see their Temple in this state was much more than an

*It appears that the miracle part of Hanukkah was more of a late addition as the story of Hanukkah combined with the ancient longing to bring light to the darkness of winter and with other stories and celebrations.*

inconvenience, more than an awful mess, more than an outrage... The desolation of the temple meant disconnection from God and separation from goodness and meaning in life.

When the Jews recaptured the temple and entered it, seeing it in this state, they were inconsolable. They screamed. They cried. They tore their clothes. They despaired. But eventually, they got down to work. They cleaned, they repaired. Most of all, they re-consecrated and rededicated the sacred temple that had been profaned. Cleaning and repairing would not be enough. They believed it was only through the power of symbolic action and ritual that the temple could be restored to purity.

What if we think of the undefiled consecrated temple as a symbol? Perhaps we might allow it to represent the truest, most grounded aspects of our lives. We might call it wholeness or holiness, or our connection to that which we call God. There are the good times in our lives when we know that we are acting from this deep place within. At these times, the purity of our best, most sacred selves shines forth. At these times, we find it easy to be compassionate, grateful, generous, and forgiving, and we are able to offer love freely and easily.

And there are times when that sacred temple has become polluted and spoiled. Our connection to the sacredness of life seems lost at these times. We know as we reflect that we have been moved far away from our truest and best selves.

And it doesn't require an occupying army with their idols and unclean sacrifices to move us away from the sacred.

Perhaps the false gods of materialism have been erected in the temple within – surrounded by sacrifices of the mountains of boxes and wrappings of the things that we think will bring happiness.

And the hurts and assaults that life can bring may have brought pollution into our hearts. As we struggled with this pain, our temples may have become stained with the blood of unwholesome sacrifices of busyness or of the many addictions to which we can fall prey. The stones of the altar of our hearts may reek with the corrosive decay of guilt, suspicion, mistrust, anger and hatred.

And seeing how far we are from wholeness, we may wail and tear at our clothes and despair of every moving toward wholeness.

Yet, despite everything – the unclean sacrifices, the destruction, the profane idols – the holy temple was purified and re-consecrated.

May this Hanukkah be for each of us a time of purification – a time when we can cast off the debris that keeps us from being our best, true selves. May it be a time when we mentally and spiritually remove the stains that isolate us from connectedness to all things and all beings.

*The Rev Andy Pakula is minister at New Unity, Newington Green and Islington Unitarians.*

# Woebegon in Boston, stir-up Sunday

Driving to the Unitarian College Governors' Autumn Meeting, I listened to news reports about the financial problems in Greece. Economics usually leaves me bewildered. Where has all the money gone, and why? In the Governors' Meeting, money matters were again to the fore and my ears pricked up when I heard the word 'Greek' again. The College's money managers have decided to amalgamate some of its many trust funds in the interests of simplification. One of these provides the Bibby Prize for Proficiency in Greek, now deemed obsolete. I was almost tempted to speak out against this move, recalling (to my own surprise, I admit) that I had been a recipient of this prize in my final year at the College in the mid-1960s. The disappearance of such an award says something about the changing expectations, education and training of ministers, who are now more likely to be expected to be proficient in organisational management, perhaps even economics, rather than in ancient languages. To this I can only respond, *Pan moi Helenistikou!* (*Trans?* You've guessed it, 'It's all Greek to me!')

\* \* \*

There followed a talk from Dr Graham Johnston, in charge of the Unitarian College archives at the renowned John Rylands Library in Manchester. He read out a letter from one of the earliest (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century) applicants to train for the ministry at UCM, and we laughed to hear the applicant describe himself as a 'druggist'. The word had a different meaning then, but linked with the word 'student', it gave an amusing impression to 21<sup>st</sup> century listeners. This brought back to my mind a scurrilous thought I once entertained, that of posing the question, 'Which former UCM Principal was a drug-addict?' The answer would have been the much admired scholar-minister Dr Alexander Gordon, who became Principal in 1890. Herbert McLachlan's biography of Alexander Gordon tells that he was an habitual taker of snuff, which he purchased *by the pound!* An addiction? Sounds like it to me, though this is disputed. Pope Urban VIII (1568–1644) ordered that anyone found guilty of taking snuff in church should be excommunicated. Perhaps that's why the staunch Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Alexander Gordon favoured it.

\* \* \*

Boston Massachusetts ranks high among my favourite cities, so I leapt at a chance of a visit, while my wife Celia joined in meetings of the Executive Committee of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU). I strolled on Boston Common and the Public Gardens, the leaves red, yellow and gold, the Autumn sunshine, warm even in November, glinting on the 'Make way for Ducklings' sculpture, adored by children of all ages. People were friendly and helpful. Trips on the 'T', the robust and efficient subway trains, took me to excellent museums and galleries. The city is blessed with three central UU churches within a half mile of each other, all alive, in business and with more than one minister each. We were welcomed at worship at Kings Chapel and at First Church, two very different experiences. Ah, to be in a country where church-going is the norm for a far higher percentage of the population than in the UK. Who can tell me why?

\* \* \*

It was sad, however, to see homeless and rootless people on the city's streets, asking for 'spare change', dossing in doorways, the parks and subway stations. At all three worship

## Funny Old World By John Midgley



services we attended, we prayed for those affected badly by the present economic crisis.

\* \* \*

A Sunday afternoon birthday treat was a one-man performance at Boston Symphony Hall by Garrison Keillor, of whom I have been a fan for many years. He talked and occasionally sang, uninterrupted for over two hours, mostly about his (fictional) home town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above average." Everyday stuff on first hearing, yet he simultaneously amuses and touches the depths. It was like a long, engaging sermon. "The thing that people here fear the most is that when they die they will be remembered for the most stupid thing they ever did in their lives." He hints at the hopes and concerns of the church-goers, young and old, and their clergy, mainly Lutheran or 'Sanctified Brethren', though occasionally Unitarians get a mention. "We don't go in much for tolerance or non-denominationalism," he once wrote. "In the Bible we don't find the word 'maybe' so much, or where God says, 'Well, er, there may be more than one way of looking at this.' So, we go in for strict truth, and let the other guy be tolerant of us." His radio programme, *A Prairie Home Companion* has been running weekly for years all over the USA. Many of his books and tapes are available and an inexhaustible delight.

\* \* \*

We stayed as guests of UU minister Robert Walsh and his wife Kitty. Robbie has undertaken retirement ministries in the UK and Australia and now lives in Hingham where they attend the renowned Old Ship Church. He is perhaps best known for the delightful *Noisy Stones* (1991, try Amazon Books) one of the best of the long-running stream of excellent Skinner House meditation manuals. Current GA President Ann Peart tells me she has used this one in services up and down the land, so she and others will be pleased to learn that he has a second volume out, *Stone Blessings* (2010, UUA bookstore) with more gems. I relish especially his hilarious revelation of the last thing he habitually did each Sunday morning, the moment before entering the chapel in Duxbury Massachusetts, where he served as minister. Robbie is not, however, a gentleman, at least not by Mark Twain's definition: 'A gentleman knows how to play the banjo, and doesn't.'

\* \* \*

Home, then, just in time for Stir-up Sunday. My stirring the Christmas pudding wishes were for all bankers to learn some morality to go with their economics and for good friend Robbie to keep on writing and playing the banjo and never mind about being a gentleman. Greetings to all ministers and church-goers, everywhere.

*The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.*

# In praise of tea, children and Christmas

By Colin Morgan

The late Dieter Gerhman of Offenbach, West Germany, one time secretary of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) often remarked that British Unitarians would solve problems, quietly and efficiently by sitting down and drinking tea together.

He would refer to the careful way in which the tea was made and he would suggest that the British tea-making ritual was more complex than that practised by the Japanese Geisha girls.

He called this British trait, 'An act of devotion over a pot of tea.' He considered it most profound in the way it put people at ease and, in his view, it was a serious act of worship. Most families in the UK still solve problems in this way and we all remember a parent saying, 'Don't worry, sit down, I'll make a pot of tea and then we will sort out your problem.'

Many work-study specialists have measured the effectiveness of workers who have not received the traditional tea break and compared their performance with workers who did cease work for a short while to drink tea. The results showed that the workers who performed best were those that had drunk tea.

Those people who enjoy a cup of tea would confirm that tea revives them when they are tired, and gives them heart to complete their chores.

Most Unitarian chapels and churches soon realised the good properties of tea drinking, especially for creating a warm and friendly atmosphere. Our Women's League Branches excel at making visitors welcome, and some use fine bone china – all identified by their chapel's logo printed on each cup and saucer. A good example of this practice is a photograph in the Rev Eric Jones' book, 'The Good Ground', showing a cup and saucer from the Old Meeting House, Trecynon dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

Many women during the last two world wars were employed in local industries and in many cases they undertook the work of men. My mother and her contemporaries are good examples of women having employment in heavy industry during the war years, and through their work together formed life-long friendships.

Her factory colleagues, long after the war, would meet at our home, once or twice annually, for a gossip, to drink tea and for my mother to tell their fortunes from patterns in their tea cups which would emerge when the tea had been drunk. Tea bags were not in use at this time and they would have been most unsuitable for fortune telling. Loose tea was ideal; one teaspoonful for each cup and one for the pot, but the brew was never put through a tea strainer.

I enquired from my sister Gwyneth, when she was terminally ill, 'Why were Mam's fortune-telling sessions over a cup of tea so popular with her friends?'

'Don't you know?' said Gwyneth, 'Mam always told her friends what they wanted to hear, and she never ever saddened them with bad news.'



Nativity play photo by Goto via Wikimedia Commons

'Why do you think the Good News Bible is so popular? It is because of its *Good News*, just like Mam's fortune telling with the tea cups,' said Gwyneth.

You may well ask whatever prompted me to write all these notes on tea drinking and why have I related them to the festive season which commemorates the birth of the Nazarene, the Prince of Peace?

Well, it all started when my wife and I were invited to our grandchildren's school to witness the performance of a Nativity play over a Christmas week-

end. The event started with a question-and-answer session with the school teacher who had written the play.

She explained that all her 30 pupils were infants who were thrilled that they were given the opportunity to perform in front of their parents. A mother enquired, 'Had there been any problems with discipline as the infants' class was so large?' 'None,' said the teacher. 'They are all very well-behaved children and a credit to their parents. The only problem I have had was that some pupils wanted to do much more than I asked for.'

'What do you mean?' said one of the parents. 'Please give us an example,' said another.

'Well, here is John,' said the teacher. 'He is a good boy, always wanting to help everybody and insists he should walk the second mile with people needing help. In our play, John is the Innkeeper. He has no scope whatsoever to manifest his love, and he has been instructed to say loudly and clearly: 'There is no room at the Inn!'

'I have every confidence in my pupils, and I know you will enjoy their performance,' said the infants' teacher.

So after a nice cup of tea, we all retired into the school's concert hall and waited with proud parents, grandparents and other relatives for the play to commence.

The curtains opened and there was John, centre stage, dressed as an eastern innkeeper.

Someone was knocking on the inn's front door. John hurried to open it, and in a loud and clear voice said:

'Sorry, there is no room at the Inn!

'But come on in and have a cup of tea!'

In South Wales when we want to see a friend again, we say, 'When passing, call for a cuppa'.

During the festive season we will be crowded with friends, and family, perhaps there may be standing room only, but do please call and join us for a nice cup of tea, as our tea pot is never cold and is always at the ready.

My wife and I will be happy to welcome you!

At Christmas time, our cup runneth over! And we wish you all a Merry Christmas, knowing that you will give thanks for all the tea and friends you have enjoyed over the past year. Remember, 2012 will bring us more friendships to share our traditional drink, the cup that cheers but never inebriates! God Bless you all! We have so much to look forward to again next year.

*Colin Morgan is a member of the Craig Unitarian Chapel, Trebanos, Swansea Valley.*

# Lifted on the wings of angels

By Bob Pounder

We who have been brought up and educated in a culture so heavily influenced by Christianity know that Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the arrival of the Christ child into the world. For many of us in childhood, if this event wasn't a reality, it was almost a reality. And even now if we let go a little and let our imaginations leap into one cold dark starlit night in December, can we not believe just for a moment, that not too far away, this special child, this wonderful gift from God lies cradled in her mother's arms?

Is this not a scene of such joy and tranquillity? As we gaze upon mother and child enveloped in that radiant light of pure love. A light that illuminates the whole scene as the rich and powerful, the poor and mean kneel together and worship in such humility.

The Christ child is born as she is born in our hearts, the hope of the world, the light of our lives. We ourselves come face to face with him as we approach him, coming in from the darkness, into the light of his presence where all our strivings, our greed and anger, our hatreds, our small mindedness, prejudice, jealousies and fears have been supplanted by an apparition of such purity that our very hearts are smitten as



Snow angel photo by Jolka Igolka

we resonate with a divine love with the wonder and beauty of it all.

In this moment we know who we really are and we know that this child is every child the universal child, the child in every person we meet.

As we meet his gaze through the radiance of his presence, we feel his vulnerability and a powerful sense of his trusting innocent love and we are deeply touched. We are deeply touched because we are not observers, in fact we have become at one with him, we are lifted on the wings of angels and know ourselves to be the children of God as we merge with the power of the eternal, the divine love that permeates the universe, the essence that is at the very core of our beings.

This transcendent reality, the Christmas message is the one reality for now and forever, so that in the bleak episodes of our lives when we are far away from home in the cold solitude of despair of pain and self-pity we have only to remember the light that shines in the darkness a light transcendent and immanent, a light deep within ourselves the power of love to transform ourselves and the world.

*The Rev Bob Pounder is minister at Oldham.*

## The Send-a-Child-to-Hucklow Fund

*There were eleven holidays in 2011. The children's descriptions of what the holidays meant to them are deeply moving.*

**Thank you for helping to make these holiday possible.**

**Please help us to continue giving needy children a country holiday.**

Your gifts in 2010/2011 amounted to the excellent sum of £28,762

Very, very many thanks.

Your gifts for the 2012 holidays will be as deeply appreciated as ever. Our target for the 50th Anniversary Year is £50,000 for direct donations. This year your gifts will be DOUBLED by a generous Trust up to a maximum of £50,000. It costs approximately £250 per child and we hope to send two hundred children in 2012.

Gifts will be gratefully received by the Hon. Assistant Treasurer, Rev. Chris Goacher, 19 De Montfort Road, Hinckley, Leics., LE10 1LQ. Please note that the Fund can reclaim income tax paid by any individual (as long as s/he has paid income tax) if a Gift Aid Donation form has been signed. This is now a vital part of the fund's income. Please help in this way if you can. A copy of this form will be inserted in a December issue of *The Inquirer*, or may be obtained from Mr. Goacher. Giving with a Gift Aid Donation form makes a gift of £20 worth £25 to the Fund. Gifts may now be made very easily on line by going to our website: [www.sendachildtohucklow.org.uk](http://www.sendachildtohucklow.org.uk)

The Fund is a registered charity number 271585. All gifts are used for the holidays except for gifts in memory of someone that are put into a Capital Account and the interest is used for holidays. Please remember the Fund in your will. Legacies are a much appreciated and valuable income. Copies of the report and appeal may be obtained from the Hon. Secretary Rev Ernest Baker, 145 Tullibardine Road, Sheffield, South Yorks., S11 7GN. Telephone 0114 266 1070.

# It's time to return to traditional carols

By Andrew Bethune

In our house, Christmas has stayed all year – thanks to a novelty clock given to us last Christmas. Every hour it chimes a carol – *Jingle bells, Angels from the realms of glory, Silent night, O Little Town of Bethlehem* (American tune), *O Christmas Tree, Joy to the World*, and a few others, some of which we can't identify.

Usually I pick up the Christmas season with the arrival of Advent Sunday, and lay it down again after Twelfth Night when the decorations are packed away. But this year the clock has made me think about Christmas – all spring, all summer, and into the autumn.

For me, a hugely important element of Christmas is the music.

In my 20s, I joined a church choir, and discovered the season of Advent, with its rich variety of songs and music. The candlelight carol service on Advent Sunday evening included *O come, O come, Emmanuel, The Angel Gabriel from Heaven came, Lo! He comes with Clouds Descending*. The dim light, the hand-held candles, evoked a sense of expectation, emotion, longing and waiting. It marked the start of a period of reflection and preparation.

On the last Saturday evening of Advent, a friend from choir would invite people to her flat who could read music and sing in four-part harmony. Fortified by copious quantities of mulled wine, and supper, we sang our way through the *Oxford Book of Carols*, tackling old favourites, carols too complicated for a congregation, and those deemed inappropriate for public worship such as *The Gloucester Wassail*, and *King Herod and the Cock*.

Since joining the Unitarians, I have lost that special connection with Advent and Christmas music, or perhaps it's truer to say I've drifted away from it. Such music does not form a big part of worship among us. I suppose several ideas integral to Christmas involve events and interpretations that our minds cannot accept.

Have you noticed what a very limited selection of Christmas hymns and songs *Hymns for Living* has in it? If, like me, you previously belonged to a different church, has it struck you that many of the words have been changed? Or verses of familiar carols missed out?

*O Come all ye Faithful* has had the 'God of God, Light of Light' verse cut out. *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*, the only truly Unitarian Christmas hymn used widely in mainstream Christian churches, has been tweaked so that angels announce peace and goodwill not to 'men' – but to 'all'. *Joy to the World*, undergoes a complete transformation in our hymn book, its meaning changed beyond all recognition, despite having been written by a somewhat unorthodox, and possibly proto-Unitarian, hymn-writer Isaac Watts.

I'm sure you can think of your own examples.

Altering hymns is nothing new, and by no means limited to Unitarian hymnbook editors, so let's not be too hard on them. We would not, I suspect, read a poem in church having changed the words of the poet. We would probably use the



*The Christmas carol clock, photo by Andrew Bethune*

words as written, commenting on them, and talking about what they might say to us. So why do we feel we can alter hymns?

We need our hymnbook to be a statement of our own beliefs and diversity; and to be usable in our churches. Our sense of honesty means we cannot, as a community, use certain words, though we might use them in private. And that, historically, has meant we have made alterations.

Faced with these altered lyrics, do you wish you could sing the regular words? I do. Unitarians say we look for inspiration in all faiths, so why ignore a part of the Christian heritage out of which our

movement has sprung? A complex matter, to be sure, with perhaps as many answers as there are Unitarians.

So I ask myself – is there a way to use Christmas music without simply indulging in nostalgia or suspending disbelief?

For me it has to involve concentrating on ideas which the Christmas stories evoke and Christmas songs express – goodwill, peace, gifts, family, hospitality, generosity, visitors, loyalty, a sense that God and humankind are somehow linked, hopes and fears – trying to find what meaning I can, while detaching myself a bit from what makes little sense.

One of those ideas is transformation. Think of the many journeys in the Christmas narratives, the reactions of the characters. Joseph takes a difficult but wise and loving decision to support Mary; the shepherds rejoice and wonder at the same time; the wise men change their plans; Anna and Simeon see their hopes fulfilled and tell of their hopes for the young child; Mary ponders. Herod's transformation goes the opposite way – he becomes angry and murderous.

The birth of that child changed their lives. Can it change ours?

For Unitarians, personal, inner transformation can never be a formulaic, magical thing. It has to be a process, born out of struggle, reflection, community life and all the varied events and emotions of life. It has to involve honesty and realism, discarding what is time-expired and unhelpful.

*O Little Town of Bethlehem* hints at such a transformation by invoking the Child of Bethlehem to be 'born in us today'. *Hymns for Living* omits that verse, but does include another (slightly altered) Unitarian carol – *In the Lonely Midnight* – which echoes the idea of inner birth. Here are the (original) words:

*Though the Child of Mary, sent from heaven on high,  
In His manger cradle may no longer lie,  
Love is King forever, though the proud world scorn;  
If ye truly seek Him, Christ your King is born.*

I think I shall introduce this to my non-Unitarian friends. A wise friend reminded me: It is often through reacquainting ourselves with the old and familiar that new revelations arise.

With that in mind, this Advent and Christmas, I shall revisit the familiar words with an open mind, reflect on them, and look for what they say to me. Maybe I'll be surprised.

*Andrew Bethune is a member of the Cambridge Unitarian Church.*

# Transylvania offered lessons in love

By Danny Crosby

I have just returned from a wonderful and wonder-filled trip to Transylvania, spending time with Unitarian brothers and sisters there. I had been invited to participate in the 16<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Unitarian church of Maros St George, which is linked to Dunham road Unitarian Chapel Altrincham. During my visit there were three moments that touched my heart, which I would like to share with you here.

The first moment came towards the end of a day visiting several Unitarian communities in the region. It was in a small village called Icland – there is no other settlement in region whose name ends in land, the story goes that it was originally settled by people from Ireland or England – I walked up the hill towards the parish house and settled into a little schoolroom with a few adults and two teenage girls. For some reason images of Thomas Hardy novels came to mind as my eyes passed over the scene, none of the houses had running water, everyone had a well.

The minister led a short class; I was deeply moved by the conversation which followed, translated by my co-host Anna Maria. They talked about their struggles with the current economic climate and the importance of letting go of control and not becoming blocked off from God. The words of the serenity prayer came to my mind “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference” – if only we could all find the wisdom the know the difference.

I was able to participate in the conversation; we spoke deep into one another’s hearts. I left these people with the thought that I will probably never see them again, but also knowing that this dialogue would be etched on my soul for a long time to come. During the discussion I had powerfully felt the presence of the spirit that I call God. I can picture the woman Elizabeth in my mind’s eye as she talked openly and eloquently of her struggles with life and faith ...I had ears that could hear the language that she spoke, the language of the heart.

The next day we visited Tigr Mures looking at local sites and spent some time in the Cultural Palace. I noticed that I had struggled a little due to lack of space; I am someone who is used to a lot of time and space alone. I live a very busy life but do connect and reconnect alone, throughout the day. I could feel that I was missing this. I was able to sit quietly in the cultural palace, in the main auditorium. I looked up at the ceiling, which was incredible, and the space below in silence. After a while I began to hear the sounds of an orchestra and choir practising. I began to feel the beauty of the place and in the space and quietness I felt some barriers drop ...it opened my heart and I was then able to connect to the heart of the place throughout the rest of the day ...I can feel the gentle music now, it was barely a sound but something more than silence.

On the Saturday I was invited to preach and participate in Maros St George’s anniversary service. Press had been invited. There was apparently a great deal of talk about mine and Carolyn’s visit. By now I was feeling a part of everything. I had got a real feel for the spirit of the place. It was beginning to really speak to me. I had learnt an important phrase for the



Danny Crosby

Transylvanian’s this is Isten Aldjo, which means God bless. It is both a greeting and a farewell. I decided as people arrived I would greet them at the door, with these words. I was told afterwards that they thought that they had been greeted by a Hungarian and not an Englishman, as I spoke like a Hungarian. This meant a lot to me as I felt that I had now got truly into the spirit of the place.

It was wonderful to participate in the service, to sing hymns in Hungarian and to be invited to preach, with Tamas, the minister, translating. I opened up my heart and I felt their love too. I also felt and witnessed the spirit that I know as God, flowing through all of this ...less than a whisper, but somehow more than silence.

It was a wonderful and wonder-filled trip, one I will reflect on for a long time to come. The language of the heart is a universal language that can break through any barrier, even fear and self protection. All that it requires is a little bit of faith and a whole lotta love; all that is required are ears that can listen and the wisdom to know the difference ...I’ve had a wonderful reminder of this during my time with Unitarian brothers and sisters in Transylvania.

*The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Altrincham and Urmston. See his blog at: <http://danny-crosby.blogspot.com/>*

## **HARRIS MANCHESTER COLLEGE CONFERENCE: SCIENCE AND RELIGION**

We are holding a Conference which, we hope, will appeal to all Ministers, Lay Pastors, Lay Leaders and Students for the Ministry from Monday June 25th to Wednesday, June 27th 2012. (Monday at 4.00 p.m. until Wednesday lunch). The cost will be £130, plus a small conference fee of £20.

We choose to meet when the College is holding its end of term proceedings, which will include the annual meeting of honorary Governors and Friends on Tuesday afternoon and the Valediction Service of our Oxford ministerial students.

Speakers will be announced in the new year. The Annual Service at the Conference will be conducted by the Rev. Ann Peart, currently President of the denomination.

Please contact Jane Barraclough, preferably by email at the address below if you would like to come, unless you are a member of MOSA in which case you will receive the booking forms as usual. The deadline for bookings to be received is the 1st June.

**Jane Barraclough  
Secretary of Harris Manchester College Oxford  
Ministerial Old Students’ Association  
Cross St Chapel  
Manchester M2 1NL  
Tel: 0161 8340019  
email: revjvb@gmail.com**

# Letters to the Editor

## Remembrance issue was first class

To the Editor:

How refreshing to read the Rev Bob Pounder's leading article in the recent 'Remembrance' edition of *The Inquirer*. It's no more than you would expect from a good Unitarian, but after a week or more of patriotic flag waving, marches, pomp and hype it was refreshing all the same to hear someone speak so sensibly about the horrors and aftermath of war and to read his suggestion of a way forward for humanity, seeking the answer within ourselves.

I was particularly struck by his utter rejection of the final stanza of John McCrae's poem 'In Flanders Fields'. I made the very same point some years ago in our local Parish Magazine and didn't exactly make myself popular with some of its readers. To me the final stanza of the poem jars with the serenity and feeling of peace in the two preceding ones. McCrae might have said in conclusion; 'Please don't forget us' in so many words, but his plea that

we should carry on the battle, as Bob says, is self-destructive and counter-productive. Thank you, Bob, for writing one of the best articles I have read for a long time on the subject of Remembrance!

In the same edition of the magazine Cliff Reed produces a quite beautiful poem on 'No Greater Love' so I think *The Inquirer* can rightly congratulate itself this year on a first-class Remembrance issue.

When I read such material from such gifted contributors I know exactly why I joined the Unitarians some five or six years ago!

**Graham Williams**

Kidderminster New Meeting House

## A free way to help poor children have holidays

To the Editor:

The 50th Anniversary Celebrations of Send-A-Child-To-Hucklow are now



well under way and all ministers and congregational secretaries should have received a package of leaflets, posters and an anniversary service copy.

Readers of *The Inquirer* may appreciate knowing that the Send-A-Child-To-Hucklow Fund is now registered as a "good cause" with 'easyfundraising.org.uk' and once registered with this site, the SACH fund will receive a small percentage of everything you spend when you shop online. It does not cost you any extra when you shop this way. All you have to do to register is to access this site via our website at <http://bit.ly/t9nGeR> or [www.sendachildtohucklow.org.uk](http://www.sendachildtohucklow.org.uk) and follow the link at the bottom of the page using the keyword 'Hucklow'. Alternatively, you can go directly to <http://bit.ly/rJxRyE> or [www.easyfundraising.org.uk/causes/sendachildtohucklowfund](http://www.easyfundraising.org.uk/causes/sendachildtohucklowfund).

Have fun celebrating 50 years and raising money for the start of the next 50 years.

**Pauline Smith**

Trustee, Send a Child to Hucklow

# Opinion: Views differ on work of CCJ

By Alan Goater

The article: 'Unitarians can build a bridge' in issue 7781 left me feeling uneasy.

Following an approach from the Council for Christians and Jews (CCJ) it appears that Unitarian Chief Officer Derek McAuley 'agreed to explore ideas to see if we can facilitate participation of Unitarian ministers in CCJ's highly regarded study course at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial Centre in Jerusalem' and the CCJ's project manager 'agreed to write an article for the Inquirer on CCJ's work and how Unitarians might contribute'. Derek has since enjoyed 'a nice social occasion with opportunities to chat informally in a non-religious context' hosted by the CCJ.

I think this last one does not represent a suitable quid pro quo for Unitarianism however agreeable the venue and hospitality! I would like to know who holds the Yad Vashem study course in high regard and why they do so. I would like to know exactly what is meant by 'facilitate participation of Unitarian ministers' and who exactly are the 'we' who wish to do so.

My scepticism concerning this project arises from experiences in Israel/OPT and knowledge of the historical and current advancement of the expanding interests of the state of Israel through the co-opting and disarming of potential opposition abroad. My fears were not allayed when I read the article written by the CCJ project manager which, true to the modern narrative of Zionist propaganda, raised the spectre of anti-Semitism in our midst, assumed a conflation of the Jewish religion with the state of Israel and asserted exclusive

ownership of the memory of Nazi crimes against humanity. The juxtaposition of these three dubious notions is designed to trigger enough sympathy and guilt on the part of good Christians everywhere to forestall any criticism of, let alone any action against, the brutal antics of the government of Israel. It usually works.

However, it is nearly two years now since the Christian churches of the Holy Land came together to issue the Kairos Palestine document which, among other things, called on fellow Christians throughout the world to support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign against Israel's continuing occupation and dispossession of the Palestinians. In the UK only the Methodists appear to have been able to overcome the bullying and manipulation of the Israel lobby to the extent of partly answering this call with a resolution at their 2010 annual conference to boycott the produce of the illegal settlements in the Occupied Territories and to investigate the theological validity of Zionism. According to the Jewish Chronicle, the Methodists 'disregarded advance warnings from the CCJ concerning damage to relations between Jews and Methodists'.

I am afraid that if we follow Derek's recommendation there will be little danger of action to further the cause of justice for the beleaguered people of all faiths in Palestine taking precedence over the maintenance of cordial relations with their oppressors' representatives here in the hearts and minds of Unitarians.

*Alan Goater is a member of Shrewsbury Unitarians.*

# *Ministers studied ways to resolve conflict*

**By Maud Robinson**

In September ministers gathered at the Nightingale Unitarian Conference Centre in Great Hucklow for the Ministerial Fellowship annual conference. Alongside the formal programme, we joined together for worship, informal discussion and fellowship – an important opportunity, especially for those, such as myself, who live far away from colleagues up in the wilds of bonnie Scotland. It was good to exchange ideas, to be refreshed by attending worship prepared by others, and to catch up with the deeds and deliberations of dear friends and colleagues.

The formal programme was largely given over to training in Transforming Church Conflict provided by an excellent facilitator, Colin Patterson, from the Mennonite Bridge Builders organisation. During seven intensive sessions over two days we shared experiences of conflict, and discussed styles of conflict and differing styles of response to conflict. Some basic assumptions that underlie the Mennonite training are worth repeating in full:

- ▲ Conflict is normal and will remain with the church until the end of time.
- ▲ Conflict is always related to power, and the ability to influence.
- ▲ Conflict brings danger and opportunity.
- ▲ Conflict may be a sign that people care.
- ▲ Our culture does not prepare us to deal well with conflict.
- ▲ Jesus calls us to address conflict directly (in common with many other wise spiritual teachers, I would add)
- ▲ We can grow in our effectiveness in handling conflict creatively and positively. But conflict always has the potential to hurt and destroy.

In one useful exercise we performed A Personal Conflict Style Inventory, trying to honestly assess how we deal with both emerging and escalating conflict. Based on our answers, the exercise indicated our most likely styles of response to conflict, in situations when issues first arise, and when conflicts escalate. The five approaches to conflict were seen to be: Collaborating; Forcing; Compromising; Avoiding; and Accommodating. It was interesting to note that for most people the ‘preferred’ style differed depending on the intensity of the situation.

It is very useful to be given the opportunity to stand back and look at one’s approach to difficult situations with a calm observer’s eye; with greater awareness of how we tend to approach issues, it is more likely that we will be able to assess and make beneficial changes to our responses in the moment of responding.

As outlined in the basic assumptions above, conflict is normal and will always be with us. It’s very important that we embrace this reality if we are to continue to grow and thrive as church communities. Conflict will always be with us because conflict arises from the necessity to change and grow; this is encompassed within the statement that conflict is always related to power and the ability to influence. When the possibility of change rears its head people react in different ways, some champing at the bit and wanting to brush the past aside and start with a clean slate, some strongly holding to the traditions of ‘how things are done here’.



*Ministerial Fellowship members gathered at Great Hucklow for their annual conference.*

Something has to give; and without taking sides, uncompromisingly, with the change-makers, I have to suggest that, if communities are waning, there seems to be a strong imperative to embrace the possibility of change. One of our congregations which has shown strong growth in the past couple of decades is Dublin; when asked about the secrets behind this success, the Rev Bill Darlison emphatically stated that it was because life-long, older members of the church welcomed change with open arms and excitement. Having been a member of the Dublin congregation before training for ministry, I especially remember one older member, Paddy McElroy, now sadly departed this life; Paddy wasn’t a life-long member, but he had been a member in the days when the congregation numbered about 20. He used to opine “I don’t want a lot of troublesome new folk coming in disturbing our cosy club.” But he said this with a twinkle in his eye, and when a new member of the congregation took their courage in their hands and decided to lead a service for the first time, no matter how or what they did, Paddy would be the first one out of his seat after the service, bestowing a huge hug on the service-taker and telling them how wonderful they were. I remember receiving Paddy’s hug following my very first service, and I’m sure it played no small part in where I am today – for better or for worse – leading services every week.

Following the Mennonite training we had some time for feedback and future planning about other Ministerial Fellowship issues; primary among these was an introduction to the workings and vision of the new Strategic Planning Group for ministry. This is one of the three Strategic Groups established by our General Assembly’s Executive Committee (EC) to lead change and growth in the three areas identified by consultation with members as being most the most important focus for the efforts of our national leadership. Stephen Lingwood, as convenor of the Strategic Planning Group for ministry, introduced us to the structure and vision of the group, still in its infancy. It was a brave move on the part of the EC to appoint one so young and so new to ministry to this important role, and brave of Stephen to take on the role. With youth, Stephen brings vision, enthusiasm and openness to change and I fully support him, and ask others to do the same, as we move ahead re-visioning what ministry, in all its forms, will look like in 21<sup>st</sup> century Unitarian communities.

*Maud Robinson is minister at Edinburgh.*

## Only the Heart Hears the Music

Near a village called Azincourt where once were gathered up  
the bones of the slaughtered nine thousand, there is a peaceful forest.

Great trees, their massive trunks like carved stone pillars  
raise high their branched arches to the sky, and the leaf dappled  
sun lights up a tranquil space, a vast sylvan cathedral  
whose bosky peal proclaims Sitque Pax non Bellum

For across these green lands men and horses have trampled;  
around these woods death has come untimely by sword and arrow,  
knife and noose, treachery and bullet, mine and gun.

The screech owl mimics the cries of the dying,  
and the craters of destruction  
masquerade as pools of sweet white lilies.

In the blackest night only imagination can see the light;  
in the deepest silence only the heart hears music;  
God alone can speak with the voice of a man who has no tongue.

Let your tired eyes embrace the bright darkness,  
your heart rejoice in the outpourings of the passionate nightingale  
and gentle quiet surround your restless soul.

God is in the darkening light and the muted crescendo;  
his the still voice that echoes far, like thunder  
dancing amongst the jubilant hills.

By a million years of blood and bone have these sacred fields  
and lonely woods been nourished, and Mary's Christ Child sleeps  
secure now, in an old stable beneath the sheltering trees.

The Lord is in this place.

— Naomi Linnell

